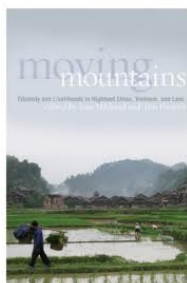


REVIEW: *MOVING MOUNTAINS*

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Michaud, Jean and Tim Forsyth (eds). 2011. *Moving Mountains: Ethnicity and Livelihood in Highland China, Vietnam, and Laos*. xvi+235. Foreword (Terry McGee), illustrations, contributors, index. Toronto: University of British Columbia Press. ISBN: 978-0-7748-1837-7 (hardcover 85USD), (paperback, 37.95USD).

Moving Mountains stands out among recent discussions of the Southeast Asian Highlands, drawing from twelve contributors with extensive field experience living and working in locales closed to non-Communist academics between 1945 and 1990 (3). The authors' methodologies focus on the anthropological approach of participant observation combined with oral history. Previously, substantial research had been confined to the experience of "hill tribes" in Northern Thailand (11), unless one gained access to the massive collections of French language research under the École Française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO) or the Société Asiatique (SA), both in Paris. As such, this volume's contributors are able to ring out the voices of Southeast Asian Massif populations in a way that demonstrates a mindful assembly of research, while carefully narrating a more complex view of the region than that presented by Scott's (2009:22) "zones of refuge."

Methodologically, *Moving Mountains* draws heavily on Scott, particularly *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), *Domination in the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), and *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). Thus, *Moving Mountains* suggests that most new works on the Southeast Asian Massif must act, as has

this volume, in conversation with Scott's works.

As Michaud and Forsyth argue in their introduction "Rethinking the Relationships between Livelihoods and Ethnicity," although the volume examines the integral relationship between the Communist nations of Laos, China, and Vietnam, it also addresses the border zone of this portion of the Southeast Asian Massif from a transnational framework. The advantage of this transnational discourse is that it allows for the examination of both minority populations that have traditionally existed within national boundaries and populations that have moved across national boundaries. This approach thus highlights the problematic discourse of state-oriented policy addressing *national* minorities, and moves the discourse toward a more complex examination of "the relationships between (marginal) local subjects, (global) market forces, and (national) states" (3). An important point regarding these relationships is that the earlier civilizational discourses derived from Christian missionary activities in the region has historically differed very little from similar discourses present in both Marxist rhetoric and neo-liberal reforms (6, 46, 73, 220).

A key theoretical foundation is introduced in Gros' chapter on "Economic Marginalization and Social Identity" that reminds readers that such terms as *montagnard* (Vietnam's highland populations) are ethnonyms, and also *exonyms* for they represent names given to ethnicities from "people who do not belong to that group" (36). The Vietnamese exonym *mọi* was adapted to form the French term *moïs* that was used to refer to uplands peoples throughout the colonial period. Meanwhile, the French term *montagnards* was shortened during the 1960s and 1970s by Americans to form the exonym *yards*. In the contemporary state, the terms *Thái* and *Tày* are exonyms referring to two groups of a dozen Thai-speaking peoples in Northern Vietnam, totaling a population of 3.8 million (148). As is the case with the 'Montagnards' and Gros' case of the term 'Quizì' as applied to Drung populations along the Sino-Vietnamese border, these exonyms generally do not represent accurate forms of self-identification. However, as Gros argues, in the case of the Drung, the levying of ethnic identity in order to excise gains from national programs has

occasionally *increased* dependence on the state, and therefore *decreased* true autonomy (47).

For highland populations, such as the Tarieng – a Mon-Kmher people situated on the Laos-Vietnam border – decreased autonomy has equally come at the hands of the Lao state. As Daviau argues in "Integration of a Lineage Society on the Laos-Vietnam Border," scholars ought, in certain cases, apply a Foucauldian understanding of the *raison d'être* of the Lao PDR to establish a *panopticon* or a "mechanism of surveillance and conditioning of individuals' identities, behavior, and livelihoods under the guidelines of state socialism" (51). This model disassociated the Lao language from standard Thai (53). "Superstitious" animal sacrifice was prohibited as "counterproductive," and the Lao Luom (ethnic Lao majority) *lamvong* 'traditional dance' and *sin* 'skirt' proliferated amongst minority populations (55). Furthermore, highland populations were resettled as part of policy advocating resettlement as a means of economic improvement and integration into the global market (57). Daviau convincingly argues that resettlement is presented as a means for local populations to assert their agency, as individual communities strategize to prevent resettlement, while others opt to participate in government programs (68-69, 73). However, resettlement can also dramatically impact biological diversity. Several rice varieties have been lost from villages in Laos that routinely demonstrate over ten varieties, in a country that holds "half of the global gene bank for rice" (70).

Participation in government programs, as articulated in the case of the Tarieng, is a theme equally communicated in the contrasted oral histories of two Khmu individuals from northern Laos, as presented in Evard's discussion of highland populations that participated in the establishment of the Pathet Lao regime and migration to the lowlands to areas abandoned by the Tai during the War. Other populations who did not side with the Pathet Lao recalled narratives of forced migration (84). Thus, state policy responded with attempts to "strengthen friendship" across ethnic bounds to remind individuals that "the army needs the people like the fish needs water" (89, 93). Again, in this case, the overarching theme of participation in the state economy has now shifted toward participation in the global

market, although the opportunities created can also "create or perpetuate spaces of exclusion and insecurity" (95).

The theme of spaces of exclusion and insecurity is repeated in Claire Tugault-Lafleur and Sarah Turner's examination of "Rice and Spice: Hmong Livelihoods and Diversification in the Northern Vietnam Uplands," where Hmong practices of economy, politics, and cosmology in the territories surrounding the tourist boom town of Sa Pa differ substantially from the majority Việt-Kinh practices that have not always benefited from the Đổi Mới economic reforms instituted in the 1980s (102, 104). In interviews, traditional healers repeated that they must now walk farther and farther into the forest in order to harvest medicine since Đổi Mới (110). In response to the increased pressure of globalization and deforestation, the Hmong have adopted a variety of crops to gain economic security, including wet rice, maize, government subsidized HYV seeds, and black cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*), which have all played an integral role in overcoming food deficits (112, 116). Thus, Tugault-Lafleur and Turner conclude that research must not become trapped in "utilizing an equation in which positive outcomes for those involved are measured only in terms of economic indicators" (118). Rather, the measurement of instances where highland populations exert agency becomes an additional value of research.

The value of agency remains a theme in McKinnon's exploration of "Hani Agency and Ways of Seeing Environmental Change," where deforestation becomes an integral element to the conversation, as local Hani villagers still revere a "sacred forest" even though this forest is only a remnant (125). Local *tusi* 'native officials' have remained an additional integral element to the negotiations of Hani livelihoods over time, despite challenges from national authorities that occurred during the Great Leap Forward and the land reforms of the 1980s, until the "post socialist period" where local farmers have increasingly been able to "farm as they choose" (129-132). For the *tusi* and the Hani, unfortunately, in some cases the ability for farmers to "farm as they choose" has had sustained negative environmental impacts, such as in the cultivation of lemon grass as a cash crop that resulted in deforestation for both planting and collection of firewood needed to refine the crop into oil (136).

McKinnon argues that Hani reverence for the land was demoted to a "hidden transcript" in the process of development. However, this same process reactivated Hani in the context of the *Xibu dakaifa* 'Western Regions Development Program' also known in this volume as the 'Go West' scheme, China's most recent attempt at agriculturally and economically focused land reform (142-143).

The central theme of land reform reappears in Mellac's "Land Reform and Changing Identities in Two Tai-Speaking Districts in Northern Vietnam." This chapter examines the similarities and differences between the comparative case studies of Chợ Đồn (Chi Bồn District, Bắc Kạn Province) and Bản Lướt (Than Uyên District, Lai Châu Province).¹ Both locations have historically been subject to the centralized authority of the pre-colonial Kinh, Tai, or Han; the colonial French, the collectivist socialist, and the post-socialist liberal models of economic governance, continuously adapting their own local-level customary rules (150) to these different authoritarian contexts. However, the allocation of paddy land, official land, the equanimity of access, and the allocation of forestland differed radically in these two cases (164). Mellac's argument justifies flexible wording of legislations that allows for the adaption of local processes, systems of administration, and collectivization that are not necessarily replicas of a "uniform market-driven and individualistic land system" (170).

As another form of local innovation, Swain introduces the concept of "ethnic tourism" in a Yunnan-based case study of "Commoditized Ethnicity for Tourism Development" that describes how highland ethnic groups in Yunnan capitalize on their ethnic identity in regions such as Shilin, Dali, and Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna). Through the narratives of factory owners, trip organizers, local traders, fashion promoters, "performance of ethnicity and the production of identity are expressed through strategically embracing economic opportunities, when attainable" (189).

¹ *Chợ* derives from the Vietnamese word for 'market' and connotes a central trading location, while *bản*, as used here, represents a Vietnamization of the smallest administrative division of Tai speaking peoples - the village.

The theme of strategic embracement of economic opportunities is central in Sturgeon's examination of "Rubber Transformations" among highland populations of Xishuangbanna. How the "grain for green" program has resulted in a proliferation of rubber plantations in exchange for guarantees of rice from central authorities is justified as environmentally friendly, as the trees are used to prevent soil erosion (202). Though this may provide substantial opportunities for local business elites, Sturgeon concludes that "it is clear that neo-liberal moves such as transferring the financial responsibility for education and medical care to rural residents do not represent a teleological pathway toward 'retreat of the state' on all fronts and may reflect state regrouping rather than retreat" (211).

The volume concludes with some "Lessons for the Future" from Michaud, as a reminder that the discourse over borderlands remains fundamental to discussions of ethnicity in the Southeast Asian Massif. Michaud also reminds us that borderlands can be interpreted more broadly than through a simplistic territorial definition, and advocates locating additional venues for qualitative and quantitative research methods to bring out the voices of those individuals upon the borderlands. He thus demonstrates that examinations of Southeast Asia continue to have global relevance thus the community of Southeast Asian scholars, like the communities these scholars examine, "are not just reactive; they constantly innovate" in their examinations of "truly sustainable livelihoods" (225).

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